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BROWNING IN WAR TIME

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Many teachers have grave doubts about the wisdom of studying Browning's poems in the high school, for they feel that the work demands more time than can be given to it, and they find students unresponsive to the stimulus of Browning's personality. If older readers react vigorously in answer to Browning's dynamic optimism, if they feel the thrill of his hearty, buoyant love of living, if they are intensely stirred by his dogged faith that the human soul grows and is happy by means of struggle and doubt and even apparent failure, is it not possible for younger readers to gain some share of this inspiration? Is Browning over the heads of high school pupils? Do they see only the chaff and none of the wheat in his work?

Never in the history of the world has there been such emphatic need of devoted study of those writers who illuminate moral virtue, and who offer constructive, specific philosophy of life. Our young people are maturing in a world devastated by terrific passions,—a world where all thinking beings are forced to formulate sharply their ideals of conduct. These young folk will need to learn the immutable truth that compassion, self-abnegation, love, faith, and unflinching magnanimity are as important as courage and lofty patriotism. They must realize that there is the heroism of righteous fighting for a great cause and, also, the heroism of the inconspicuous daily battle for more just

and active moral standards. Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Browning are poets who teach us to

“Know the arduous strife, the eternal laws
To which the triumph of all good is given,
High sacrifice and labor without pause
Even to the death.”

The question, then, is this,—how can Browning's minor poems be made important and stimulating reading for young students? There are three points that may be suggested. In the first place, is not the work with Browning postponed too long? Might it not come much earlier in the program? Many pupils, especially boys, have a distaste for poetry, yet are often won to an enjoyment of verse by the swinging measures of Kipling or Macaulay. By placing the study of Browning early in the course, teachers may find this poet far less difficult than Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, or Gray, for Browning offers an easy and obvious approach to the appreciation of poetry. He has a brisk, individual style, he pays little attention to the purely aesthetic element in poetry, he writes spontaneously, and in a strongly marked rhythm. His robust attitude of mind as well as his vigorous music will make their appeal to the most prosaic pupil.

For example,—*Cavalier Tunes* gives a splendid introduction to this poet and to poetry in general. Reading these poems aloud in concert a group of students will at once find delight in the rollicking tunes with the hearty swing of the chorus. Moreover, the very obviousness of the various kinds of rime will attract notice, for in the first of the poems there is strongly emphasized middle rime, in the second daring broken rime, and in the third the clever use of a single repeated rime. The diction is particularly racy and piquant. “Crop-headed,” “pestilent carles,” a “rouse,” and other expressions will stir some wonder and will interest pupils who are suspicious of the softer, more melodious, more poetic diction of such a poet as Shelley. The omissions, the contractions, the short, staccato phrases, the sudden swift turns, the elliptical style are an excellent introduction to Browning's individual manner. Each one of these poems is a dramatic monologue showing Browning's power of giving objective dramatic reality to persons far away from his own age and experience. It is a comparatively easy task to lead students to realize that here is a fine revelation of the

power of the imagination, for if they are asked if Browning shared the sentiments of the Cavaliers they will answer an indignant "yes" at the very suggestion that this is not Browning speaking. However, discussion will bring out the fact that Browning has written dramatically, that by his imagination he has entered into the very life and feelings of these seventeenth century speakers and has made them real and human, just as Shakespeare makes his characters living beings. Thus may be introduced the interesting question of the way in which Browning read English history. Comparing these *Tunes* with a page or two from some English history, the pupil will quickly appreciate Browning's power in giving so vivid a picture of the loyalty of these Cavaliers, and in arousing in the reader warm sympathy both with their devotion to their leader, and with the zeal and boldness they show in facing danger. Here is a revelation of courage, faith, tenacity, generous sacrifice of self, and who can fail to respond to Browning's ardent enthusiasm?

Almost all the narratives on the list selected from Browning's works have the dash and freedom and appeal of epic poetry, inspired by real deeds. In *How We Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix*, *Herve Riel*, *Pheidippides*, and *The Pied Piper* the reader is swept along by the exultation of the narrator, and awaits with breathless eagerness the outcome of the adventure. The poet's command of narrative, his power of converting a distant fact into an immediately present experience, his imaginative particularization of detail so stir the emotions and the imagination of young readers, that they will ponder a little over the character of the heroes represented, who show such fixed purpose, such indomitable will. Again, the haunting metrical beat of the adroitly-managed stanzas, the simple yet arresting diction, and the terse, often humorous style will prove a valuable means of training in the technique of poetry, and will prepare the way for the finer discriminations to come later. The average pupil will certainly be aroused to appreciate the reach of Browning's imaginative sympathies, his ability to describe the thundering speed of horses galloping to Aix, the details of a sea-fight off France, the triumphant but fatal race of an ancient Greek patriot, and the whimsical history of the Pied Piper of Germany.

Deeper ideas may be introduced by the study of *Incident of the French Camp*, *The Italian in England*, *The Lost*

Leader, and *The Patriot*, for class discussion may be focussed upon such questions as the origin of devotion to a leader, to a cause, or to a country. Youth feels the romantic glamor of giving all for the heart's desire, and these poems that picture supreme loyalty "even to the death" will be absorbingly interesting. What a field of discussion is opened here, regarding political ideals, the questions of sacrifice and martyrdom often unappreciated, misunderstood, or even futile! Browning exalts the passion for spiritual honor at all costs; he scorns the selfish weakling and craven, he glorifies the person whose aim is high, whose ideals are unselfish and noble. And yet how free the poems are from that didacticism which we all dread! The moral lessons are taught so artistically that we cannot resist them.

If beginning the study of Browning early be the first step, the second should be a step in connection with the descriptive poems, especially those that relate to Italy.

Teachers need to explain a great deal more than they do what the references in the Italian poems mean. Any one who has looked over the annotated editions of these poems is aware how unsatisfactory the notes are. The American child knows almost nothing about Italy and usually cares less, yet there is a world of odd, attractive wonder and beauty revealed in *Up at a Villa*, *Doren in the City*, and in *De Gustibus*. How many school editions explain what a *villa* is or attempt to picture the Italian's country life from Horace till today? Is there any suggestion that the tulips still grow in the Italian wheat, and that "the faint gray olive-trees" are characteristic of the land to which so many English poets have paid poetic tribute? A little effort on the teacher's part would supplement the deficiencies of the text books which give only scant if any explanation of many fascinating allusions. With photographs, with Baedeker's guides, much can be done, and such invaluable works may be read as Mr. Howell's *Italian Journeys*, W. W. Story's *Robo di Roma*, Crawford's *Ave Roma Immortalis*. Ouida's *Signa* and *Ariadne* will give teachers joy and information; to their great surprise, probably, they will find in Ouida a remarkable sensitiveness to natural beauty. Miss Margaret Sherwood's *Daphne* pictures a modern villa at the edge of the Campagna. Mrs. Anna McMahan's series of books: *With Shelley in Italy*, *With Byron in Italy*, and *Florence in the Poetry of the Brownings* have pictures and much illustrative material of value to the student. Of course it is a blunder to omit *The Englishman in*

Italy from the list of poems to be read, since that poem more than any of the other pictures everyday life, the sorocco, the pomegranates, the vineyards, the olive, the lizard, the processions, and numberless other elements that form the conception of "*Italy, my Italy*." America needs to know Italy, for the sake of literature and for the sake of life. A long line of English writers from Chaucer to Browning has found inspiration in the beauty of Italy, and today we know that the war is bringing Italy closer and closer to us. Our young folk should know its history, its long struggle for liberty; should know of Mazzini and Garibaldi and Cavour. They should know also the background of these heroic figures, and should be acquainted with the geography and the art and the ideals of the country. Is there any pleasanter means of beginning an acquaintance with Italy than a study of Browning's Italian poems?

The third point to be made is this: there should be included in the list of readings a few more of the poems that exhibit the essential Browning. Browning's consummate reliance upon love as the very centre and explanation of existence, the source of happiness, the one eternal fact in a universe of perplexity, grief, and doubt is his greatest teaching. Next is his optimism, his faith in the spiritual power of man to grow by means of struggle and of defeat. To study Browning without finding out these truths is to get a false idea of the poet. Since many pupils may not read Browning after high school days we surely ought to see that he is interpreted and represented fairly. Beginning with the narrative poems and going on through the descriptive, teachers ought to conclude the work on Browning with a survey of some of his more poignantly mature and more intimately beautiful poems which express, dramatically, views about the deeper faiths of everyday life and love and hope. Might it not be worth while to select for later study of Browning a few of these poems: *My Star*, *Love Among the Ruins*, *One Way of Love*, *Fra Lippi* (better than *Andrea del Sarto* for normal young people who find *Andrea*'s passivity too difficult to understand) *Saul*, *Abt Vogler*, the unescapable *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, and the *Epilogue to Aso-lando*. These poems illustrate Browning's later work and are vitally representative of the doctrines of a poet unconventional, uniquely rugged, and magnetic. Browning's faiths are imperatively needed today. Other poets have more art and living beauty, but who, besides Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth, so radiates strength and spiritual health?

EDITORIAL NOTE

The following letter brings forcibly home to English teachers the necessity of stressing our work in Oral English.

Extracts from letter written by

THE ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE, Washington, August 28, 1917.

THE PROBABLE CAUSE OF THE CONSIDERABLE NUMBER OF REJECTIONS OF CANDIDATES FOR RESERVE OFFICERS AT THE TRAINING CAMPS.

"Perhaps the most glaring faults noted in aspirants to the Officers' Reserve Corps and one that might be corrected by proper attention in our high schools, preparatory schools and colleges, might be characterized by the general word "Slouchiness". I refer to what might be termed a mental and physical indifference. I have observed at my camp many otherwise excellent men who have failed because in our school system sufficient emphasis is not placed upon the avoidance of this mental and physical handicap."

"A great number of men have failed at camp because of inability to articulate clearly. Many men disqualified by this handicap might have become officers under their country's flag had they been properly trained in school and college,"

"It is hoped therefore that more emphasis will be placed upon the basic principles of elocution in the training of our youth . . . Great improvement could be wrought by instructors in our schools and colleges, regardless of the subject, insisting that all answers be given in a loud, clear, well rounded voice, which, of course, necessitates the opening of the mouth and free movement of the lips."

"In addition to this physical disability and slouchiness is what might be termed the slouchiness of mental attitude. Many men have not been trained to appreciate the importance of accuracy in thinking. Too many schools are satisfied with an approximate answer to questions. Little or no incentive is given increased mental effort to coordinate one's ideas and present them clearly and unequivocally"

"I have further noted at camp that even some of our better military schools have turned out products that while many of them have the bearing of a soldier in ranks, yet their carriage is totally different as soon as they 'fall out'. Schools, military and non-military, should place more insistence upon the bearing of pupils all the time. It should become a second nature with them to walk and carry themselves with the bearing of an officer and a gentleman."

"As a last important element that seems to me has been lacking in the moral and mental make-up of some of our students here, is the characteristic of grit. Not that they would have proven cowardly in battle, necessarily, but some have exhibited a tendency to throw up the sponge upon the administration of severe rebuke or criticism. Their 'feelings have been hurt' and they resign. They have never been taught the true spirit of subordination. They are not ready for the rough edges of life. The true training school should endeavor to keep one's eyes fixed upon the goal rather than upon the roughness of the path, to realize that one unable to rise above the hard knocks of discipline cannot hope to face with equanimity the tremendous responsibilities of the officer under modern conditions of warfare. This ideal of grit belongs in the school room as well as upon the campus."

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